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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000479

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: SMOOTH OPERATOR

REF: (A) ASTANA 0431
(B) ASTANA 0412
(C) ASTANA 0147

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 13, the Ambassador had lunch with Nurbakh Rustemov, the Chairman of the International Affairs, Defense, and Security Committee of the Mazhilis (the lower house of the parliament), and Romin Madinov, the Chairman of the Mazhilis's Agrarian Committee. Madinov made a case for greater U.S. investment in Kazakhstan's agricultural sector. Rustemov said that the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Agreement will be considered at a plenary session of the Mazhilis on March 18. He expects it to pass with no changes and to move quickly through the Senate. Both parliamentarians expressed hope that a "new chapter" of U.S.-Kazakhstani relations will begin under President Obama and said that a POTUS visit to Kazakhstan would be most welcome. We strongly suspect the real reason for the lunch, although it remained unspoken, was for the Ambassador to see the "friendly professional" side of Madinov who has become rather notorious as the plaintiff against the opposition newspaper, Tazzhargan" [ref A]. END SUMMARY.

CHINESE INVESTMENT WORRISOME?

13. (SBU) Nurbakh Rustemov, the Chairman of the International Affairs, Defense, and Security Committee of the Mazhilis (the lower house of the parliament) invited the Ambassador to lunch on March 13. Rustemov's colleague, Romin Madinov, the Chairman of the Mazhilis's Agrarian Committee and chairman of the Agrarian Party now folded into the ruling Nur Otan party, also attended the lunch. Madinov pitched extensively for greater U.S. investment in Kazakhstan's agricultural sector. He recommended that the United States and Kazakhstan diversify their bilateral economic relationship and focus more attention on agriculture. He claimed

that the "the Arabs and the Chinese" have already expressed interest in Kazakhstan's agricultural sector, but he would prefer "to deal with American companies." (NOTE: See ref C for discussion of Arab investments in Kazakhstani agriculture. END NOTE.) "You don't have to worry about the Americans like you do the Chinese -- Americans will not want to bring their own workers, they will not put down roots and stay," maintained Madinov, voicing the unease with which some Kazakhstanis view their large neighbor to the East.

CTR AGREEMENT ON TRACK FOR PASSAGE

14. (SBU) Rustemov told the Ambassador that the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) agreement will be considered at a plenary session of the Mazhilis on March 18. He expects it to pass quickly and go immediately to the Senate. The Senate has 30 days to review the legislation, but Rustemov believes the agreement will be approved by the Senate much quicker, since the text has already been "pre-negotiated" with the Senate's relevant committee. The Ambassador thanked Rustemov, noting that Senate Chairman Tokayev promised him that he would push the CTR agreement through the Senate quickly (ref B).

"NOTHING PERSONAL IN POLITICS"

15. (SBU) Rustemov said that President Obama inspires "big hopes" and that a POTUS visit to Kazakhstan would be most welcome. Madinov expressed hope that President Obama's election would open a "new chapter" in U.S.-Kazakhstani relations. He alleged that during his 2002 trip to the United States, "someone high up in the State Department" chastised Kazakhstan for lagging on democratic reform and pointed to Uzbekistan as the "democratic example" to follow. Madinov said he hopes the new Administration will have a new, "more nuanced" approach to Kazakhstan. "There should be nothing personal

ASTANA 00000479 002 OF 002

in politics," he said. Rustemov emphatically agreed, telling the Ambassador that "we are ready to help" in providing Washington with a more complete picture of Kazakhstan.

KYRGYZ DECISION ON MANAS "HARD TO UNDERSTAND"

16. (SBU) Rustemov told the Ambassador that Kyrgyzstan's recent decision to close the Manas base is "hard to understand." The Ambassador suggested that some in the Kyrgyz leadership might not be comfortable with this decision. Madinov joked that "now (the Kyrgyz) are trying to figure out how to keep Russia's money, allow you to keep your base, and increase your payments to them," all at the same time.

REGIONAL COOPERATION -- "IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME"

17. (SBU) Rustemov said President Nazarbayev seeks to strengthen cooperation among all the Central Asian states and also to develop closer links among the Turkic states. He admitted that Uzbekistan's President Karimov, whom he referred to as a "crazy person," continues to be a stumbling block for regional cooperation, however, "Karimov won't be around forever." In the meantime, Kazakhstan will continue to lay the necessary groundwork for regional cooperation. "If you build it, they will come," he said.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although it is not unusual for Kazakhstani officials to offer or to accept invitations for working lunches and dinners with foreign diplomats, we were a little surprised by this invitation, since there seemed to be no real agenda. In fact, the lunch was unusually chummy, with more than one vodka toast - a practice most Kazakhstani officials avoid. Further, there were a number of jokes, including one at the expense of the Putin-Medvedev tandem. At one point, Madinov invited the Ambassador to join him for a weekend at a resort. It was only after the lunch that we realized Madinov is the plaintiff in the case against opposition newspaper "Taszhargan," which resulted in the Almaty City Court fining the newspaper \$200,000, which is sure to put it out of business. We suspect the whole purpose of the lunch was to show the Ambassador Madinov as a "friendly professional" who only rarely chomps down whole newspapers. END COMMENT.

